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A university's relationship to activist and academic research in adult and popular education

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A university's relationship to
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Rick Flowers



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Abstract

This article in English provides insight into the history, development and implementation of popular education in Australia. Rick Flowers, director of the Centre for Popular Education at the University of Technology in Sydney, describes his personal journey as well as the journey of his research group toward action and participatory research. Applied and participant oriented research and seminars no longer want to distinguish between academic and action research and teaching and resolutely attempt to implement both. This development was driven by the question of what role universities have and can take on in adult and popular education. The article also points out the theoretical background to the development in the content and organization of the research institution. Marxist educational discourses should be combined with Paulo Freire's approach to a "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and theories on community education from the German speaking world. The very personal article finishes with examples of the concrete work done by the Centre for Popular Education. (Ed.)

A university's relationship to activist and academic research in adult and popular education

Rick Flowers

Here I will present a case study of a research program in adult and popular education at an Australian university. At the outset, let me draw attention to a difference between the state of adult education in Australia and Austria and speculate about the extent to which the activist and entrepreneurial nature of research at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) was influenced by Australian policy reforms.

I am going to ask Austrian readers to imagine massive funding cuts to their *Volkshochschulen* and furthermore a reduction in core funding for universities. Then consider the impact on the nature of research in the field of adult education. This is what happened in Australia. Given the neo-liberal policy reforms in Australia, it is ironic but perhaps predictable that some university researchers should focus less on formal adult education provision and more on informal adult education in social action and community development.

Relationship between academic and activist work in adult education

At the Centre for Popular Education UTS, we undertook both academic and activist research. As academic researchers, we made interpretations of theory and practice in popular education and social action. As activist researchers, we not only tested but also further developed these interpretations with practitioners. We saw ourselves as academic

activists in the field of adult and popular education strengthening the capacity of a university to support 'popular struggles for democracy, equality and social justice' (see Crowther/Galloway/Martin 2004).

About the Centre for Popular Education UTS

The Centre was established in 1996. Staff undertook research, consulting and teaching activities concerned with education and community capacity building. In particular, the Centre was intent on studying and supporting educational practice that serves the interests of people who are marginalised, and/or are engaged in advocacy, community action or community development activities. Centre members researched and taught in a range of arenas, including health promotion, youth work and education, arts and cultural development, international and community development, adult and community education, basic education and social action.

The Centre for Popular Education had six major research program areas. They were:

- Learning and action for the environment
- Community action and community leadership
- Pedagogy and politics of working with young people
- Health education and community development
- Community cultural development
- Education and advocacy work with consumer and refugee solidarity groups

Much of the Centre's research was of an activist orientation. One aspect of this meant generating research knowledge in collaborative processes which included the university research staff, practitioners and grassroots activists. The Centre produced a variety of publications co-authored by these kinds of stakeholders.

Deciding on the name 'Centre for Popular Education'

The term *popular education* had little currency in Australia. We asked ourselves: Was it appropriate for what we were doing and intended doing? Was it appropriate in Australia? The term has a historical and theoretical justification, and although not widely used it was gaining currency overseas. We decided to keep the name and by doing so accepted that in part the mission of the Centre was to promote both the term and the philosophies associated with it. From the outset, we emphasised there were multiple traditions of popular education and that the Centre should undertake research and advocacy work to examine and make popular education meaningful to Australian activists and community workers (see Flowers 2009).

Looking for a stronger intellectual base for the Centre

As the Centre grew, we began looking for a stronger and more consciously espoused intellectual base. In the beginning, there had in effect been four people associated with the Centre — Griff Foley, Michael Newman, Tony Brown and me. Foley examined adult education through the prism of a Marxist political

economy (see Foley 1994 a. 2001). He wrote: "*My account is a materialist one [...] organizational life is determined by material realities like capitalist social relations, gender relations and unconscious motivations and dynamics*" (Foley 2001, p. 227).

The origins of the Centre for Popular Education can, therefore, be said to have been in Marxist thought.

In the early stages of the Centre's work, Tony Brown was undertaking research about training reform in the context of workplace and economic restructuring. In his PhD thesis, Brown spelled out his Marxist perspective.

If the key to capitalism is the market in human labour-power then the role of trade unions as the primary institution of the working class assumes a central importance.

Brown 2003, p. 22

The other person who was part of the small group in the beginnings of the Centre was Michael Newman. From 1993 onwards, his writing was increasingly influenced by Frankfurt School Critical Theory and an interest in ethical and moral issues of activist education. In 'Maeler's Regard' he wrote: "*Adult education for critical thinking is constructed on an ethical stance. It is a form of education by and for those wanting to understand the world in order to change it. It is education for social justice*" (Newman 1999, p. 56).

It was at this time that we came across debates in the German literature from the 1970s between advocates of historical-materialist and critical-emancipatory perspectives in youth and community work. This helped crystallise the debates we were having in the Centre between Marxism and Frankfurt School Critical Theory.

Applying ideas from German theorising in the Centre's work

Four broad ideas were highlighted in our study of pedagogy, youth and community work in Germany.

Each of these ideas can be found in the Centre's work.

- There is a need to continually interrogate educational theory and practice in community development and social action.
- Emancipatory learning can, contrary to some theorists, be planned and informal education strategies are useful in this respect.
- There are both materialist and critical perspectives on emancipatory change and learning.
- There is value in trying to define the micro-detail of emancipatory practice.

Planning emancipatory learning

At the Centre for Popular Education, we encountered activists and popular educators who took the view that radical learning cannot be planned. This sharpened our resolve to develop research projects based on the conviction that it is possible and desirable to plan and facilitate emancipatory learning. We took these ideas from German debates into a research project conducted for the Mittagong Forum. This was a coalition made up of the national environment advocacy organisations in Australia — including Greenpeace, Australian Conservation Foundation, Worldwide Wildlife Fund, Wilderness Society, Friends of the Earth — and state and regional peak conservation councils. We were commissioned to undertake research about capacity building and learning in the advocacy-oriented Australian environment movement (see Flowers/Parlane 2000). This research established that there were sharply differing views about what should be the priorities for strengthening the capacity of grassroots environmental activists. Some placed an emphasis on their technical skills in organising campaigns. Others emphasised organisational leadership abilities. Yet others argued that activists should be supported first and foremost to engage people in local communities and work with them to raise their awareness and preparedness to take action. People holding this third view saw activists as informal educators. As a result, the Centre pursued research that would enable environmental activists to theorise about themselves as adult and popular educators and then more consciously plan strategies to win the hearts and minds of people

and mobilise their support for environmental social action (see Flowers/Chodkiewicz 2009; Flowers/Guevara/Whelan 2009). In this sense it was activist research.

Including materialist and critical perspectives

The Centre drew on both materialist and critical perspectives in our action research for community leadership development. We did not simply deliver training programs for community leaders, nor did we simply do academic research. In each project, we worked in partnership with frontline community development organisations over a period of one to two years helping them to try out and theorise about new strategies.

The critical theory perspectives encouraged my colleagues and me to research practice that would develop critical thinking, facilitate emancipatory learning and bring about incremental change in individuals and communities of which they were a part. An activist perspective to community leadership development emphasises the enabling of 'ordinary' people to have a voice, to become more effective in communicating and to develop a stronger sense of belief in their agency — that is in their own capacity to bring about change, thus leading to a greater degree of social justice. Activist adult education is to do with the construction of a civil society. Our research was underpinned by an assumption that most people can, at different times, exercise community leadership. They may be long-term unemployed, tenants of a public housing estate, ex-offenders or young people who have left school. They are often not in positions of institutional authority or anointed 'leaders' but on certain issues and at certain times will be capable of exercising positive community leadership. Drawing on our research in community cultural development, we instigated a project whereby a group of six women undertook research to prepare a book which revealed their anger and frustration about the issues facing their local neighbourhood. This was activist research in that these women who had little formal education were mobilised and supported — with the help of photographers and creative writers — to articulate their ideas for community development.

We believed that the Centre had a role in helping people construct their own knowledge about popular education and develop their own theory. An example of this construction of knowledge, the Bulletin of Good Practice was a journal published by the Centre in which we placed academics alongside practitioners and encouraged practitioners to describe their practice and develop their own analytical frameworks to explain that practice. We drew on historical-materialist theorising by working in areas of Australia occupied by the traditional working class. The historical-materialist debate in the German literature emboldened us to develop research that took the political economy of the areas and the people we were researching into account. For example, we sought to research the educational elements within the programs of the large social and sporting clubs in the western suburbs of Sydney which are centres for leisure and recreation in traditional working class areas.

Defining the micro-detail of emancipatory practice

The influence of a fourth idea taken from our study of German theorising can be seen in efforts at the Centre for Popular Education to define the micro-detail of emancipatory practice. Drawing on the work of Horst Siebert (1983), Bernt Armbruster (1979) and Helga Marburger (1981), who developed definitional frameworks, the Centre took a step toward developing research about informal and popular education by devising tools and frameworks (example below) that attempt to deepen understanding about how particular types of community work practice facilitate particular types of learning and how particular values and discourses shape practice.

Framework to define and reflect on the focus and type of community leadership development

- Has it strengthened issue-based activism?
- Has it strengthened civic participation or participatory democracy?
- Has it led to positive place-based change?
- Has it strengthened grassroots community development?

- Has it supported local agencies to extend links with the local community?

Practice-based research for popular education and social action

We used the label 'practice-based research' to describe the Centre's commitment to studying practice. One of my first initiatives after being appointed Centre Director was to establish a research program about 'cultural action,' and I will describe the process of establishing this program because it conveys the nature of the practice-based research that we developed. In the mid-1990s we were receiving a growing number of requests by practitioners for examples of popular education in Australia. Activists and community workers who had worked with the Centre learnt about theories and practices of informal and popular education. Most of them had not initially recognised an educational dimension to their practice. We introduced them to the writings of informal education theorists such as Mark Smith and Tony Jeffs and to popular education theorists such as Paulo Freire, Griff Foley, Michael Newman and Shirley Walters. As they learnt more, they wanted to apply these theories to their practice in Australian settings and looked for other examples. I could find few Australian examples that drew directly on traditions of informal and popular education, but I did find examples that exemplified features of practice highlighted in these traditions. In 1998 I had just completed writing a diploma course in community cultural development for the Community Arts Association of New South Wales. That project provided me an opportunity to write about practice where artists collaborated with youth and community workers effectively engaging people and creating opportunities for active participation and emancipatory learning.

In 1998, the Centre called an informal meeting of practitioners interested in studying more examples of community cultural development and popular education in community work. There was an encouraging response. Community workers from health, local government, community development, environmental education projects and schools attended, and we received emails from across Australia with requests to be placed

on a mailing list. The enthusiastic response confirmed that there was a high level of interest in practice-based research. This type of research involves theorising that is grounded in the reality of practice and is undertaken collaboratively between practitioners and academics. Most of the people who expressed interest in the network were experienced practitioners and were keen to learn about ways other practitioners were theorising about, appraising and evaluating their practice. They wanted to make more sense of what they were doing and to improve how they did it.

A number of us believed it would be possible to develop a collaborative research agenda between the Centre and various practitioner groups. We were aware, however, that this might not be regarded as scholarly research because of the leading role played by practitioners. Now we wanted to validate and support this sort of research from a university centre but did not know how such research might be funded, sustained and developed.

We planned and convened the first of what became a series of public forums about cultural action. At the first one day forum, there were the following presentations:

- A nun, a visual artist and two community workers from the St Vincent de Paul Society discussed how Freire's ideas informed their work. The visual artist told us how he immersed himself in a community and showed how he produced codified pictures.
- Three women from the Older Women's Network talked about how they organised and advocated for more services and rights. They combined their talk with a performance on electric guitars.
- The leader of the Sydney Trade Union choir talked about how his philosophy of emancipatory learning underpinned his practice, led forum participants in singing exercises and de-briefed the exercises.
- Two academics from the University of Western Sydney presented their developing theoretical framework of cultural action for degree programs in social ecology.
- Five activists from a group called Culture Lab presented a chanting, drumming and breast beating session, arguing that their theory of cultural action drew on ideas of internationalism, meditation and ritual performance.

Over 80 forum participants attended. They were mostly community workers and they needed little encouragement to interrogate the politics and practice of the various groups of presenters. The forum presented a snapshot of practices and the theories that shape them. But the quality of the theorising was mixed. There was a striking diversity among the presenters but they all professed a common interest in social justice, transformation and emancipatory education. In the concluding discussion, participants expressed a strong interest in having more opportunities to engage in discussion and analysis and to write and read about their work.

Further forums focused on different aspects of practice including Theatre and Storytelling for Cultural Action, Songs and Music for Cultural Action, Dance and Movement for Cultural Action, Celebrations for Change and Development, and Youth Arts for Social Change. At all these forums, we invited experienced practitioners to describe and discuss their practice in a critically reflective manner. In many cases we taped their sessions and used transcripts to encourage the practitioners to write about their work. The forums were well attended and participants expressed strong interest in strengthening a culture of research and enquiry.

After four of these forums, we approached the Australia Council for the Arts and asked if they could provide funding support. This led to a three year partnership between the Centre and the Australia Council. We had an open-ended brief to foster more research and analysis of community cultural development practice, with a particular focus on evaluation. We were invited to undertake commissioned research by other agencies such as VicHealth, a health promotion foundation, and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, a major community service and advocacy body.

With the forums and projects led by staff at the Centre for Popular Education, a body of theory and accounts of practice grew. We asked what particular sorts of knowledge were likely to improve informal and popular education practice in community work. In a context where community workers in Australia have not had much exposure to educational theorising about their practice,

one obvious type of knowledge contribution is to name the educational and learning dimension of community work.

Mixing action and theory in our conferences

The strategies we used to mix action and theory can perhaps be best seen in the Centre's three-day conferences — Education and Social Action — convened on a bi-ennial basis. We devised these conferences to have both a festival and seminar character. They had academic papers and keynote lectures, but they also had workshops led by activists and practitioners. Some of these workshops encouraged dialogue and some concentrated on skills, exchange and development. There was a strong performance dimension to create a festival-like atmosphere in which action and theory mixed. Radical choirs, poets, dancers, acrobats and theatre groups performed in the foyer spaces during the breaks. The conferences were collaborative endeavours. We invited partners to devise and co-ordinate particular strands. These partners included small NGOs such as Action for World Development, government departments such as the NSW TAFE Access and Equity Unit, peak advocacy groups such as the Youth Action and Policy Association of NSW and other university

centres. The conferences attracted international scholar-activists including Bob Hill from North America engaged in queer education and advocacy, Astrid von Kotze and Linda Cooper from South Africa with histories of participation in the anti-apartheid struggles, Luc de Keyser, who is a social movement theorist from Belgium, and Maria Khan, a Filipino activist and adult educator. A sample of keynote speakers lined up by our partners illustrates the broad theoretical base. They have included Lyn Yates and Deb Hayes, postmodern critical theorists; Peter Willis, a phenomenologist; Budd Hall and Lyn Tett, critical-emancipatory theorists; and Bob Boughton and Griff Foley, historical materialists.

The Centre for Popular Education developed an extensive conference and forum program. The conferences and the forums were designed to position the Centre as a leader in creating various research agendas. The conference and forums were planned closely with external partners. They provided an opportunity for practitioners, policy makers and scholars to highlight and define research issues. The goal was to place the Centre in a position where we spent less time responding to calls for tenders and to other people's research agendas and more time responding to research invitations from external partners who have collaborated with us through our forums and conferences. This strategy proved successful.

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Das Verhältnis der Universität zu aktivistischer und wissenschaftlicher Forschung in der Erwachsenen- und Volksbildung

Kurzzusammenfassung

Dieser englischsprachige Beitrag gibt einen Einblick in die Geschichte, Entwicklung und Umsetzung von Popular Education in Australien. Rick Flowers, Direktor des Centre for Popular Education der University of Technology in Sydney, beschreibt seinen persönlichen Weg, aber auch den Weg seiner Forschungsgruppe hin zu „action and participatory research“. Es ist bzw. sind das angewandte und teilnehmerInnenorientierte Forschung und Seminare, die nicht mehr zwischen wissenschaftlicher und Aktionsforschung und Lehre unterscheiden wollen, sondern entschieden versuchen, beides umzusetzen. Angetrieben wurde diese Genese immer wieder von der Frage, welche Rolle Universitäten in der Adult and Popular Education haben und einnehmen können. Der Beitrag zeigt aber auch den theoretischen Hintergrund der inhaltlichen und organisatorischen Genese der Forschungseinrichtung auf: Marxistisch-kritische Bildungsdiskurse sollten mit Paulo Freires Ansatz einer „Pädagogik der Unterdrückten“ und Theorien zur Community Education aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum zusammengeführt werden. Beispiele konkreter Arbeit des Centre for Popular Education runden den sehr persönlichen Beitrag ab. (Red.)

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